



Inland Northwest News

A river falls through it

by Pia K. Hansen

There's something calming and soothing about being close to water, but there's also something grand. As long as people have gathered to construct towns, they've sought somehow to incorporate water by building great fountains or splashing waterfalls. In some places, the incorporation of water has gone even further, allowing great cities such as Venice and Amsterdam to be defined more by the water that flows through their picturesque canals than by any one building.

Nearly 100 years ago, the Olmsted brothers recognized the beauty of the Spokane River Falls located so close to downtown. The legendary firm had been many places and seen many things. Their landscape and architecture company had helped develop New York City's Central Park and the park systems in both Seattle and Portland, just to mention a few places. And when they visited in 1908, they saw the potential of turning the Spokane Falls into a park. In 1917, when they presented their actual proposal, the document suggested that the Spokane River Gorge become the new center of the Spokane Park system. Today, some 93 years later, that still hasn't happened -- but that doesn't mean it never will.

On Thursday, Sept. 27, Friends of the Falls, along with the many civic groups and sponsors the non-profit organization works with, is hosting an open house featuring the proposed Gorge Park. Appropriately, the gathering takes place at Affair at the Falls, overlooking the focus of all the attention, the Spokane River Falls.

"Everybody here is vested with the landscape of the falls and the surrounding area, but this is not just about preserving the falls," says Rick Hastings, president of Friends of the Falls and a Spokane architect. "Communities all over the U.S. are doing similar things to attract good business and jobs. One of the first things corporate scouts look for in new locations is access to green space. Just imagine having this great greenbelt right downtown. You could be right next to River Park Square, get on the Centennial Trail and be able to get away from the city right away."

Friends of the Falls was originally established to oppose the proposed Lincoln Street Bridge. After having successfully fought that battle, the group went on to pursue the Olmsted brothers' old dream of seeing the Spokane River Gorge crowned with a beautiful park.

On Thursday, Friends of the Falls and the Great Spokane River Gorge Group (G3) will present the first part of the project plan.

"What we are looking at is the first part of a three-phased project," says Hastings. "Phase one is the concept plan, which we are working on right now."

The G3 is looking for as much public input as possible into this part of the project. On Sept. 8, the group held an initial design meeting, where some of the ideas for the Gorge Park could be seen for the first time.

"That's where we really got the ideas down on paper," says Hastings. "We want to get feedback now. We want to know what it is the public would like to see. Maybe we focused on the wrong elements? Maybe people don't want viewing sheds or what have you. We want to know."

The open house next week will be followed by another presentation in November, and Hastings hopes they'll be ready for phase two -- the rollout of the actual concept in February of next year.

"That's phase two, when we start moving toward the execution of the master plan," he says. "Provided that the necessary funds do come in, we could have the commission out by late summer and then move toward phase three, the actual execution."

Hastings is not willing to put a final price tag on the project yet, but says the funding could come partially from the city.

"We'd be looking to a variety of sources. The city could be one partner, Avista may be another one," says Hastings. "Summit Properties [owned by Metropolitan Mortgage] has already committed to building the extension of the Centennial Trail on the rim of the river and underneath the Monroe Street Bridge."

The expansion of the never completed Centennial Trail is actually a big part of the Gorge Park project. As it runs right now, the trail more or less ends in Riverfront Park, from which bikers and runners have to go on the West Central Bike Trail in order to reach Riverside State Park.

"We have been working with Friends of the Falls on our West Link Project," says Kaye Turner, executive director of the Friends of the Centennial Trail. "Completion of that part of the trail is the spearhead, as far as I understand, to start this whole project."

Turner says the new part of the Centennial Trail would run along the Summit Properties' bluff, located to the immediate west of Monroe Street on the north bank of the river. Then it would drop down to the river and cross it on a new footbridge where the old railroad abutments still sit in the river, off Ohio and Summit Boulevard.

"The trail is missing from Riverfront Park to Riverside State Park. With this bridge completed, you could go up Government Way to the Military Cemetery, then into Riverside State Park," says Turner. "It could also connect to the Cheney-Fish Lake trail on the other side of Sunset Boulevard."

That project, including the bridge, has been in the planing stages for nearly 10 years, and it does have a price tag.

"The total project would cost \$1.9 million, and we are \$500,000 short of reaching that," says Turner. "We have some state and federal grants, but we need more community support. If we could get more of that, we could possibly get more grants."

Friends of the Centennial Trail will be at the open house on Thursday. Delegates from the Spokane Tribe will be there as well.

"We want to preserve what's left there around the falls. Mainly, there is a lot of wilderness that deserves protection in the area," says Bryan Flett, tribal heritage coordinator for the Spokane Tribe. "I think the main catch phrase we have been using is preservation, protection and recognition of the area. Obviously it's still a place that is highly regarded by tribal members."

Flett says that there are several places in the Gorge area that are sacred and spiritually very meaningful to the tribe, but that he's not ready to disclose those.

"For now, we just want to recognize that this was one of the main gathering areas of the tribal people, the Coeur d'Alenes and the Colvilles, and many other tribes," says Flett. "They'd come together here because of the huge salmon that would come to the falls. It was like a big fair, there would be a lot of bartering going on." He adds that it's absolutely paramount for the tribe that the salmon runs return to the Spokane River someday.

"It will come back. Maybe not in our lifetime, but it will return," says Flett. "We are not advocating the removal of the dams, but with technology we have today, there's gonna have to be a way to get the salmon back there."

When that happens, Flett would like for the river to be ready to receive it. "We have to have a clean environment for the salmon to come back to," he says. "It's going to take a while to get the river clean, let's not get the salmon up here just to kill them. We have got to make sure the water is clean. Water is life. Without clean water, there's not going to be any life."

The tradition of the tribes gathering and fishing at the falls is something Hastings says he feels transcends our times.

"The gorge matters because it's the centerpiece of our community, and it ties us together both physically and symbolically," says Hastings. "Whether one cares about recreation, history, geography, culture or our economy, the work to preserve the gorge contributes to that."

Actually, Hastings believes a Gorge Park can do a lot to unite the community.

"We may find that our search for common ground leads us quite literally to this, Spokane's riverfront," he says.

*The Great Gorge Discovery open house is Thursday,
Sept. 27, beginning at 5:30 pm at Affair at the Falls,
located at 510 N. Lincoln Street. Call: 979-2874.*

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